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Asia - AFP

Bush signs new Myanmar sanctions, pledges to stand with Aung San Suu Kyi

Mon Jul 28, 11:40 PM ET

WASHINGTON (AFP) - President George W. Bush ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) imposed tough new sanctions on Myanmar's crippled economy, vowing Americans would not desert opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in her struggle for democracy.



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Bush signed the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003, which garnered huge majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate two weeks ago.

"The world must make clear, through word and deed, that the people of Burma, like people everywhere, deserve to live in dignity and freedom, under leaders of their own choosing," said Bush in a statement.

He said the move was a "clear signal" to Myanmar's generals that they must release Aung San Suu Kyi, arrested in May, and move towards democracy."

The sanctions, which go into force in a month, include a ban on all imports from Myanmar, and are aimed especially at the crucial textiles trade in an economy teetering on the brink of

collapse.

"By denying these rulers the hard currency they use to fund their repression, we are providing strong incentives for democratic change and human rights in Burma," Bush said.

The legislation also authorizes the president to aid Myanmar democracy activists, freezes the regime's financial assets in US banks and property in the United States, and widens a visa ban on Myanmar officials.

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"The United States will not waver from its commitment to the cause of democracy and human rights in Burma," said Bush.

He accused Myanmar's ruling generals of organising an attack on a motorcade in which democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi was travelling in late May, which led to her arrest.

In an official media commentary at the weekend, the generals said that violence that led to her arrest proved her National League for Democracy (NLD) was bent on a "strategy to plot the downfall of the existing government."

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The government ruled out ever standing aside in favour of the pro-democracy opposition, saying the only way forward was for them to work together.

"The true programme for democracy is ... accepting the existing Tatmadaw (military) government as an ally and joining hands with it," it said.

Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest dashed hopes that a tentative UN-brokered reconciliation progress between the government and the opposition could lead to genuine political change.

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Eyewitnesses said Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters, who had been making a political tour of northern Myanmar, were ambushed in May by a pro-government mob in an incident feared to have left dozens dead.

The new law won a warm welcome in Congress, where the rulers of Myanmar, the former Burma, have few friends.

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"The sanctions legislation signed into law today by President Bush is a tough measure, but no tougher than Burma's ruling thugs deserve," said Democrat representative Tom Lantos, a co-author of the legislation.

"The Burmese government had two years to deal seriously with Aung San Suu Kyi, and instead, they viciously attacked the Nobel Laureate."

At the State Department officials denounced the junta attack on Aung San Suu Kyi.

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"They made some accusations about Aung San Suu Kyi undermining democracy that are just absolutely outrageous and fly in the face of the facts," said spokesman Richard Boucher.

"The onus for failure to establish genuine dialogue is clearly on the side of the junta."

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The latest commentary, part of a series denigrating Aung San Suu Kyi and aimed at justifying its actions on May 30, blamed the NLD for Myanmar's ills since 1988 when a pro-democracy uprising was brutally put down.

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Elections held two years later were won in a landslide by the pro-democracy party but the results were never recognized by the regime,

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leading to an unresolved political deadlock.

Unbowed by the new US legislation, Myanmar Foreign Minister Win Aung said Sunday that there was no schedule for Aung San Suu Kyi's release.

"We will announce it when the time comes. I can't see a timeframe right now," he said shortly after arriving on an official visit to Indonesia.

Aung San Suu Kyi met an international Red Cross official on Monday and was in good health, the ICRC said here.

"She was found to be in good health and good detention conditions," International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) spokesman Eros Bosisio said.

Bosisio said Suu Kyi was able to talk "in private, without interference" with the ICRC official in Myanmar, but he declined to give further details on the visit.

Myanmar's foreign minister Win Aung predicted on Monday that the pro-democracy leader and Nobel peace prize winner would not remain in detention "for a long period".

But the minister, facing international outrage over Suu Kyi's arrest, refused during a visit to Indonesia to give any timeframe for her release.

The ICRC's visit came during ongoing attempts to check on conditions of all those detained after the May 30 clashes in northern Myanmar.

"So far we have registered more than 30 people," Bosisio said, following visits since June to prisons in northern Myanmar and near the capital Yangon.

He said the ICRC hoped to visit Shwebo prison, north-east of Mandalay, on Thursday.

"We think that all the people detained in the May 30 events are there," Bosisio added.

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